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MSO concert has glowing moments

By JACOB SISKIND

Music

In spite of the fact that most of the music on the program was new to these concerts, the Montreal Symphony performance last night at Salle Wilfrid Pelletier was not unlike a visit with old friends.

To begin with, there was the return of Zino Francescatti, one of this city's favorite violinists, in a work with which he has been particularly identified over the years — the Saint-Saens Concerto No. 3. Then there was the return after an eleven year absence of the British Conductor John Pritchard.

And finally there was the belated local premiere/first performance of a work composed 185 years ago — the Haydn Symphony No. 95 in C minor. While the piece may have been a novelty at these concerts, it is surely familiar to most music lovers through performances on the radio or on records.

The one genuine novelty on the program was the Symphony No. 2 by Sir William Walton, a work completed in 1960 and, incidentally, a work given its world premiere by the man who was conducting last night.

Easy on the ear

The Walton piece is one of those contemporary works that fall easily on the ear the first time round. It uses forms that are familiar to any concert goer and its harmonic and melodic language can almost be described as traditional.

For all that its wind colors recall those of Bartok, and the occasional hints of Dukas and other composers of this and the 19th century, the music is distinctive and very individual.

The first movement's drama is real and holds the attention of the listener. The finale, despite its changes of structure (from passacaglia to fugue to scherzo), is filled with a wealth of detail that never loses contact with the listener. There are hints of serial techniques, but the composer carefully refrains from allowing this to become formula writing.

The work was given a dramatic performance by the orchestra, though I felt that the repeat of the concert this evening will probably benefit greatly from the run through last night. There were moments in the slow movement when I found my attention wandering and I suspect that this may have been caused by uncertainties that will probably be cleared up by tonight.

The Saint-Saens Concerto was given a glowing performance by Francescatti, who seems to be enjoying a vintage year this season. I have rarely heard him play with greater eloquence and sensitivity.

It must be reported, however, that the Salle Wilfrid Pelletier does not do violinists justice. Once again I had to strain to hear the soloist, even in passages where the orchestra was playing pianissimo. This was particularly disturbing in a performance in which one wanted particularly to hear every note and nuance.

The concert opened with an absolutely delicious performance of the Haydn Symphony No. 95, which made one regret that this was its local premiere and that Pritchard had not been here more often in the past decade.

Grace, wit

All of the humor in the score was projected with wit and grace and the tempi never had the players scrambling. Perhaps Pritchard can be invited to do a series of all-Haydn concerts. I have the feeling they would be superb.

Mention must be made of Walter Joachim's quite extraordinary contribution in the trio of the third movement. I have never heard the solo cello part played quite this way.

'Calabash' combines dullness, good acting

By TOM SCURFIELD for The Gazette

The Black Theatre Workshop opened its winter season last night with a production of A Calabash of Blood — combining moments of boredom with some creditable acting.

Set in the West Indies during the 1800's, the play traces the passions, fears and longings of both whites and blacks on the eve of freedom of the slaves.

Author Eric Roach, a native of the island of Tabago, has used a melodramatic triangle to examine the complex relationships that the slave system brought to the islands.

Ramsey, the master of the sugar cane plantation, is sixty and has recently married a much younger woman who he rescued from debtor's prison in England. Sarah, the wife, feels trapped in a "green hell," far from the magic of London and tied to a man she hates.

Her eyes turn to Jack Lightbourne, the sadistic slave overseer, who supplies her with the physical love she craves and which Ramsey is too old to satisfy. Lightbourne is also having an affair with Lucy, Sarah's brown-skinned maid, who is carrying his child.

Through all this, Lucy is loved by Boy Tom, a young field slave, who she hates because of his black skin. Lucy thinks of herself as "almost white" and above the other slaves.

This complex plot also draws in two other characters — an old slave and his wife Mamba who is considered to be a witch doctor. Congo is devoted to Ramsey, as are the other slaves, as he is a good kind master who has been fighting for their emancipation for years.

The relationships are so intertwined that most of the long first act (almost one and a half hours long) is taken up a rather dull, unconvincing dialogue between Sarah, Jack and Ramsey.

RANG TRUE

On the other hand, the dialogue written for the blacks, especially Congo and Mamba is excellent. Both of these characters — superbly acted by Walter Elliot and Violet Beldon — emerge as real people, in contrast to the stereotype whites.

As Boy Tom, Jerry Meleiss caught the longing for freedom and dignity inherent in the role. His desire for his own land and home, even if it was just a shack, rang true. But Elizabeth Armsey has been much better in earlier Black Theatre Workshop productions. She seems ill-at-ease with Lucy, never bringing her to life.

Lucy Hutchins, while too shrill, is quite effective as Sarah Ramsey. Alex Newell as her husband doesn't fare too well with an almost unplayable role.

Although the script is weak, the Black Theatre Workshop has mounted a strange and satisfying production to open their winter season.

We can only hope to see more of Violet Beldon and Walter Elliot two of the brightest stars seen so far this season.

Offenbach back

Offenbach, Quebec's loudest blues-rock group, opened last night at the Evechê club of the Hotel Nelson in Old Montreal. Back in Montreal after spending 16 months in France acting and singing in the film Tabernac, the quartet has a new album forthcoming. The group appears at the Nelson through Nov. 30.

Ashcroft, Neville to read for school

Actors John Neville and Dame Peggy Ashcroft will read poetry by Pablo Neruda and W. H. Auden to raise funds for students of the National Theatre School, it has been announced.

Couples will be charged $25 for the reading, which will take place at the Centaur Theatre on Dec. 7, at 3 p.m.

Neville, the artistic director of Edmonton's Citadel Theatre and past director of the Nottingham Playhouse in England, has been awarded an OBE for his work as an actor. Ashcroft has just completed a production of Dear Liar at the Citadel, and is also the recipient of a DBE.

Pearl Buck Neruda is Chilean, a winner of both the Lenin Peace Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Auden was a member of the "Thirties generation" of British poets. Both poets died in 1973.

The reading is in aid of the Michel and Saurira Saint- Denis Bursary Fund, founded in 1974 as a capital fund with the intention of raising enough money to ensure that no qualified student would be prevented from attending the school for financial reasons.

Michel Saint-Denis was the founding artistic adviser to the NTS. With John Gielgud and Tyrone Guthrie he founded the London Theatre Studio, the Old Vic Threatre Studio, and was head of the French section of the BBC and artistic counsellor of the Comedie Francaise.

Saint-Denis was also co- director with John Houseman of the Drama Division of the Juilliard School of the Lincoln Centre. His wife Saurira is artistic adviser to the Juilliard School.

Muddy Waters concert: Icing on the blues cake

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ for The Gazette

Muddy Waters is sounding better than ever at the In Concert club in Old Montreal this week.

For blues devotees who religiously turn out for the "real thing" — no matter what shape it's in after all these years — this is good news. Waters, who is about 60, has been a consistent performer in recent years, after an auto accident and poor health had set him back at the start of the current decade.

Today, Waters is a master purveyor of his own deep dark legend, which he knows can never be duplicated by the younger generations of black pop musicians. They're often too busy with soul and disco forms to bother with the blues; in fact, it is invariably the young white blues addicts who are carrying on the tradition, such as the harp player and rhythm guitarist in the Waters band.

It was Waters who electrified the primitive Mississippi Delta blues forms of the legendary Robert Johnson when he took them north to Chicago's south side. He was already a big rhythm 'n' blues star when B.B. King was just starting out and his music has stayed basically the same since, despite attempts to dress it up on record to various effects.

ICING

Waters managed to live down the disastrous "Electric Mud" sessions of the mid-1960' and recently he released an excellent album in the company of members of The Band, who naturally idolize the man.

One cannot help but be fascinated by the Muddy Waters presence. He lets his band establish a groove for about half an hour, then he puts the icing on the cake, with a twinkle on his deadpan face, as if to say "You're never gonna hear anything like this again, so get it while you can!"

His voice is tough as leather and, unlike those of many of the older bluesmen, it is clear and forceful. His blues about the woman (as all good blues are) are deliciously and matter-of-fact, always delivered with an underlying hint of threat.

His band is founded upon the plodding, steady sound of bassist Calvin Jones in combination with Pinetop Perkins' lefthand piano rolls. The two make such a deep sound, so indelible and welllike, that drummer Willie "Big Eyed" Smith is able to add his sparse punctuations to fine effect. Throughout this almost dirge-like foundation, Perkins' right hand embellishments sneak out of the sound like gospel shouts.

Muddy Waters at In Concert

Lead guitar is handled in a dependable style by Waters' longtime associate, Guitar Junior — whose sly single-note soloes twist and curl through the journey.

Finally, amongst these veteran blossmen, there are the two white players, rhythm guitarist Bob Margolies and harpist Jerry Portnoy. Both are eminently respectful, but not to the point where they're afraid to play anything of consequence. In-

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